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In this Vaccine Brief we want to tell you about a new vaccine for which we do not yet have an ACIP recommendation. The vaccine is called Zostavax, approved by the FDA in May 2006. It is administered to persons who have already had chickenpox with the intention to reduce the occurrence and severity of shingles. Zostavax contains the same live attenuated varicella virus as Varivax. However, it contains a much higher titer of vaccine virus than regular varicella vaccine.

Like regular varicella vaccine, zoster vaccine must also be stored at freezer temperature at all times. Like Varivax, Zostavax must be used within 30 minutes of reconstitution or must be discarded. The pivotal clinical trial for zoster vaccine included more than 36,000 adults 60 to 80 years of age. Half the participants received vaccine and the rest received placebo. All participants were followed for more than 3 years. Compared to the placebo group the vaccine group had about 51% fewer episodes of zoster. Those who developed zoster had less severe disease. Vaccine recipients also had about 66% less postherpetic neuralgia, the pain that can persist long after the shingles rash has resolved. No significant safety issues were identified in the trial.

The vaccine is approved for persons 60 years of age and older. It is a live virus vaccine so it has the usual live virus vaccine contraindications, such as immunodeficiency and pregnancy. The duration of protection or need for more than one dose is not known. ACIP has not yet made recommendations on the use of Zostavax. They are expected to vote on recommendations at their October 2006 meeting. However, you do not need an ACIP recommendation to begin providing Zostavax to your patients. The vaccine is available from Merck NOW.

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